Patrick HENRY Community College WRITING CENTER

Citing Sources

Avoiding Plagiarism

Whenever you write a research paper, you have to acknowledge where you found your information. This is very important for two reasons: first, to give your readers a way to verify the claims you've made in your paper, and second, to give credit to the people whose information you are using. Taking information from someone else without properly identifying where you got it is just like cheating on a test – and just like cheating on a test, the consequences can be severe.

The difference is that **plagiarism** (that is, using someone else's ideas without properly crediting them) can be unintentional. In fact, it *often* is. However, ignorance is not bliss. Instructors aren't obligated to be lenient about plagiarism just because you didn't realize you had committed it. This is very important to remember because plagiarism – even unintentional plagiarism – violates most academic honor codes and can cause you to fail the assignment or even the entire class.

The easiest way to avoid plagiarism is to follow a simple guideline: if you had to look it up, you have to say *where* you looked it up. It's obviously a little more nuanced than that (saying "Oh, I found it on Google" doesn't really tell your readers anything, for instance), but if you put in the effort to make it clear where all of your information comes from, you'll not only be following the honor code, but also making your paper more credible and polished.

Dual Acknowledgement

The only way to write a paper without committing plagiarism is to acknowledge all the sources of your information. There's a very specific process for this, and it consists of two parts: a bibliography (which you may be familiar with in the form of a "Works Cited" or "References" page) and inline citations. Many students make the mistake of thinking that creating a works cited page is enough. It isn't. A works cited page tells your readers where your information comes from, but it doesn't tell them *what* comes from *where.* This is instead accomplished with inline citations – that is, markers in the body of the paper (such as footnotes or parenthetical references) that point to a specific source listed in your bibliography.

While the specific formats of those acknowledgements are beyond the scope of this resource, many guides on specific citation styles are available (including some right here in the PHCC Writing Center). This guide primarily discusses how to know when citations are

necessary, how to quote and paraphrase sources properly, and how to identify common knowledge.

When to Cite Sources

In general, you should cite a source any time your paper uses information from another source in any form. This includes all of the following:

- Quotes (word-for-word excerpts from a source)
- Paraphrases (putting the source information in your own words or summarizing its essential parts)
- Most facts, figures, and statistics
- Anything from outside sources that is not common knowledge

If you use any of these things in your paper, you need to cite them, both in the paper and on your works cited page.

Direct Quotes and Paraphrasing

One very common mistake people often make when writing a research paper is overusing direct quotes. Some people may have trouble putting things in their own words, while others think that quoting long sections of text word for word will increase the length of their papers while requiring minimal effort. This is a misconception, of course; quoting directly from a source actually requires *more* effort than putting something into your own words. This is because direct quotes are only meant to be used when no other words will convey the same meaning or have the same impact. As such, direct quotes need to be exceptional, and they need to be integrated into the paper. Direct quotes must be:

- Adequately introduced
    - Preceded or followed by some introduction of the source material
    - Given with the author's credentials
- Short
    - Only include the words that are necessary
- Cited
    - Followed by an inline citation and end punctuation
- Used very sparingly
    - Used only 2-3 times in an average paper unless instructions dictate otherwise

Paraphrasing, on the other hand, is when you put the source material in your own words. Bear in mind that putting sourced statements in your own words does *not* eliminate the requirement to cite your source. It's also important to remember that a proper paraphrase must be *completely* changed from the source material. A general guideline is that three or more consecutive words used from the source is a direct quote, but there is no hard rule

that constitutes a direct quote as opposed to a paraphrase. Even a *single word* should be quoted directly if it's a key word in the source.

> The reporter on the scene described the defendant's general manner in the courtroom as "defiant" (citation).

In this example, the word "defiant" is quoted because it singlehandedly forms the key idea of the material being referenced. As a result, it needs to be written as a direct quote even though it is only a single word. Paraphrased material:

- Should be completely reworded from the original
    - Don't just open a thesaurus and change a few words; for something to count as a paraphrase, the sentence and wording must be completely different.
- Should be cited
    - Even when you put source material in your own words, you must cite it.
- Should be relevant to your point.
    - Just because you've put something in your own words doesn't mean you shouldn't connect it to the rest of your paper.
- Should not be an entire paragraph.
    - Paraphrases, like direct quotes, should be short. Really, you shouldn't paraphrase more than two or three sentences from a source before adding your own thoughts.

It's important to make sure that your paraphrase really is using your own words and not taking them from the source. For example:

Direct quote (in quotation marks):

> When the Supreme Court legalized same-sex marriage, Justice Kennedy wrote, "It would misunderstand these men and women to say they disrespect the idea of marriage. ... Their hope is not to be condemned to live in loneliness, excluded from one of civilization's oldest institutions. They ask for equal dignity in the eyes of the law. The Constitution grants them that right."[1]

Paraphrase:

> When the Supreme Court legalized same-sex marriage, Justice Kennedy dispelled the myth that same-sex couples don't respect marriage, then went on to say that the US Constitution gives those same-sex couples the same right as opposite-sex couples to participate in marriage, which is a deep-rooted part of civilization.

In the example above, the paraphrase completely changes the words of the original quote rather than just changing one or two words. However, it still makes the same point. In a paper, both the direct quote *and* the paraphrase would have to be cited; a citation is not just to give credit for words, but for *ideas*.

[1] Supreme Court Justice Anthony Kennedy, *Obergefell v. Hodges*, 2015.

Common Knowledge

Common knowledge refers to statements that are so prevalently known within the scope of your topic that they don't need to be attributed to a source. For instance, a paper about hurricanes might include this statement:

> A hurricane is a large, rotating storm that forms over the warm waters of tropical oceans.

This fact is an example of common knowledge: it's the basic definition of a hurricane and would likely appear without a citation in almost any encyclopedia, dictionary, or other general reference. Even though you may not have known it before writing the paper, it is so basic to your topic that it doesn't require a citation.

When you're deciding whether something can be considered common knowledge or not, keep these things in mind:

- Common knowledge can vary greatly by subject and audience.
    - Saying that the average human body temperature is 98.6 degrees Fahrenheit is common knowledge to a nursing student, but not necessarily to an accounting student.
- Common knowledge always refers to facts, never to opinions.
    - If you said, "Rhode Island is the smallest state in the United States by land area," you have stated a fact, and that fact is common knowledge. If, on the other hand, you said, "Even though Rhode Island is small, it has pretty seaside towns and lovely scenery," that is an opinion ("pretty" and "lovely" are points of view and therefore not objective facts), and you would have to cite it if you're using it from an outside source.
- Direct, word-for-word quotes should always be cited, even if they describe common-knowledge facts.
- If you're not sure whether or not the information in question is common knowledge, it's better to cite it to be safe.